



Norfolk Federation of WIs

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Plastic pollution has been an issue for WI members for several decades. In 1971 Leigh WI (Surrey Federation) called for research "into the production of disintegrating plastic packaging materials' due to the increasing danger to livestock, other animals and the spoiling of beaches and the countryside." Our 'End Plastic' Soup campaign, was launched in 2017 to tackle the issue of microplastic fibres. But plastic litter remains a common sight. The WI has long supported the reduction of single-use plastic bags.

Should I choose cotton? However, cotton is a very thirsty crop. It takes 5,000 gallons of water to produce one tee shirt. Cotton only occupies 2.4% of the world's cropland but uses 10% of the world's agricultural chemicals and 25% of all the pesticides. Watercourses dry up or become polluted.

What about Jute? Bangladesh, the world's largest exporter, earns about one billion dollars per annum, selling to 60 countries. The textile industry is leading to the rapid economic growth of the country. They are developing and diversifying the Jute industry knowing that people across the world are becoming conscious about the benefits of the use of natural yarns. Maybe a better choice? However many women working in agriculture earn only 60% of men's wages and there is concern about the incidence of child labour.

Other plant sources are possible: lotus stems, banana, pineapple, hemp, coffee grounds. Many Norfolk WIs have enjoyed a visit from Fay Jones and her talk on the "Wonderful World of Nettles". Their stems can be retted in just the same way as flax or jute and have been used to make tough fabrics since the Bronze Age. Possible ... but not yet widely available.

Whatever material is chosen, its carbon footprint reduces with use. To have a better carbon footprint than a flimsy plastic bag, a paper bag must be re-used six times (not always possible in English weather!), whilst a jute bag must be re-used 19 times. Our centenary Norfolk WI bag is strong, biodegradable jute, easily reusable and reliable thanks to its bonded plastic lining. A happy compromise in a world of difficult choices?

Contact us at fedsec@norfolkwi.org.uk